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SELF-CONFIDENCE AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN LEARNING LANGUAGES

Summary. *The article discusses the problems of self-confidence and its importance in language learning as well as suggests a series of activities for improving it.*

Key words: *self-confidence, speaking skills, cognitive process, cultural beliefs, psychological process, introversion.*

Self-confidence is extremely important in almost every aspect of our lives, yet so many people struggle to find it. Sadly, this can be a vicious circle: people who lack self-confidence can find it difficult to become successful. Confident people inspire confidence in others: their audience, their peers, their customers, and their friends. Gaining the confidence of others is one of the key ways in which a self-confident person finds success.

Self-confidence is also very important in language learning. Researches in language teaching have revealed that foreign language learners often seem passive and silent in language classrooms. In the age of globalization, however, there is an urgent need for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to enhance their students' confidence to help them take part more actively in classroom oral activities.

Some researchers believe that speaking skills are an important part of the curriculum in language teaching, and the ability to speak in a foreign language is at the very heart of what it means to be able to use a foreign language. This importance relies on two aspects. First, our personality, our self-image, our knowledge of the world, and our ability to reason and express our thoughts are all reflected in our spoken performance in a foreign language. Being able to speak to friends, colleagues, visitors, and even strangers, in their language or in a language which both speakers can understand, is surely the goal of very many L2 learners. Second, the linkage between students' classroom participation and their academic achievement is undeniable. Studies have shown that when students participate actively in class, their academic achievement seems to be higher than that of those who are passive in class. Krupa-Kwiatkowski summarized in her study that "interaction involves participation, personal engagement, and the taking of initiative in some way, activities that in

turn are hypothesized to trigger cognitive processes conducive to language learning". The importance of the ability or perception of ability to speak should not therefore be underestimated by either teacher or pupil.

In our teaching experience, we have come such situations when some of the students keep silent all the time in class. They don't want to speak English. Even when they know the answer to a simple question, they hesitate to open their mouths. Or, they have inhibition to speak out their ideas. Encouraging students to talk in a language classroom is thus a problem that most language teachers face. Thus, although not extensively researched, reticence has been receiving increasing attention in the last decade due to the growing importance of oral proficiency in L2 learning situations. As researches show, there are many reasons for this reluctance of students' to speak in English classes:

- fear of losing face (e.g., being laughed at);
- low proficiency in the target language; previous negative experiences with speaking in class;
- cultural beliefs about appropriate behavior in classroom contexts (e.g., showing respect to the teacher by being quiet);
- habits (e.g., becoming used to a passive role in the classroom);

Many previous studies have shown that there is a direct relationship between students' confidence and their speaking behavior in L2. For example, Lai attempted to identify Hong Kong secondary students' level of confidence in using English and the factors leading to different confidence levels in oral participation in classrooms. The findings show that most of the subjects "felt a lack of confidence in using English as a means of communication in the classroom". In another study, Mac Intyre et al. suggest that self-confidence significantly contributes

to the learner's willingness to communicate in a foreign language. According to them, affective factors such as motivation, personality, intergroup climate, and self-confidence underlie willingness to communicate and the factor of self-confidence— including overall self-confidence in L2 and situational self-confidence in communication — play an important role in determining the learner's willingness to communicate.

Another main factor which influence to students' unwillingness to speak is language anxiety. Various studies comparing students' levels of anxiety in their foreign language class to their other classes indicate that students experience considerably more anxiety in their foreign language classes. The concept of 'foreign language anxiety' is still in its infancy, thus second language research has not yet adequately defined it in precise terms. Further, there are many varying degrees of intensity, which seemingly make it difficult to apply boundaries towards a set definition. Some generalizations can, however, be made. Gardner and MacIntyre define language anxiety as "the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient". Some of the symptoms include nervousness, tension, apprehension, and introversion. Many other factors such as motivation, personality, experience, and self-confidence may also play a role. Researchers have developed models to account for some of these factors.

From our teaching experience, we know that there are many activities that can be used to develop self-confidence in English classes. Learners can practice and develop spoken English skills in many ways. Regularly communicating with native English speakers on a varying degree of topics is the best way to learn to speak English fluently. However, relatively few learners of English have such an opportunity. To eventually be able to speak English fluently, learners of English must have materials with important content on everyday topics (audios, videos, printed texts/study books, etc.) for beginner, intermediate and advanced levels of study. The materials must include dialogues, monologues, questions — answers with important content, lists of difficult word meanings and phrases/expressions with usage sentences, and comprehensive vocabulary on all everyday topics. Here are some possible ideas:

1. Under the teacher's guidance, ESL/EFL learners listen to and pronounce each sentence of English speech (dialogues and narrative texts with transcripts). It is helpful for learners of English to read (pronounce) each sentence aloud and to compare their pronunciation to the narrator's pronunciation. A teacher can make sure that learners understand everything clearly in each sentence in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. This method can be used at the beginning level.

2. A teacher helps learners practice speaking on a topic (telling the content of a dialogue or a narrative text as close to the original text as much as possible: imitation of a dialogue (role-play) and narration of a text on the topic). A teacher can write key words and phrases, or main ideas as a plan, or questions in the dialogue or text learners listened to previously in order to make it easier for learners to tell the content in English. It is important to compare what they said to the transcript. It is a good idea for learners to record their speech on audio to compare it with the original audio recording. The most important thing for learners is to speak English, and to check in the transcript of texts whether they have made any mistakes in speaking. There are English conversation books and websites with thematic dialogues and narrative/informative texts on various topics to practice speaking in English.

3. It is useful for teachers and ESL/EFL learners to prepare potential questions and answers with helpful content on everyday topics, and to practice speaking. To show different ways of expressing a particular thought they can make up several potential questions and answers on one point in this speaking activity. There are some books with spoken English activities for teachers' use in the classroom that include imitation of dialogues (role play), ready-made questions with up-to-date relevant content for daily living, narrations/telling stories, talking points, discussions of issues, games, etc.

4. Extensive reading of thematic texts and materials from various sources. ESL/EFL learners should write down vocabulary they do not know into sentences to help them understand and remember the words. To help students improve their speaking ability, they should practice telling the content of a text to someone after they have read it. Learners should write the phrases and key words as well as ideas in a plan. They can also try to invent long answer questions for the text to help them to talk about the content. It may also prove wise to read each paragraph separately and then read the text as a whole.

5. Therefore, an effective way for learners to improve their vocabulary skills would be by reading thematic texts. They can start by choosing books about everyday topics that contain content of importance, such as advice and tips about making everyday life better or easier. Also, texts that provide real solutions to problems we face every day. These self-help texts can be found in bookshops, the Internet and public libraries.

6. Learning of additional conversation sentences and vocabulary from English phrase books, conversation books and English dictionaries. Quality English dictionaries give easy to understand explanations and sentences for each word. This can be extremely useful for the learner. It is also helpful for students of English to create

their own sentences with vocabulary they are less familiar with. They should think about the situations they face in real life and try to incorporate the vocabulary into the given situation.

7. It would be very useful for learners of English to make word lists containing words with meanings that are hard to understand with usage sentences from English phrase books and general English dictionaries. Learners should drill the ready-made sentences repeatedly as this helps learners remember difficult word meanings. This issue is thoroughly covered in the Longman Language Activator Dictionary. It would also be very practical for learners to create sentences of their own with that vocabulary for potential personal use, taking into account the real life situations they face. As you know, word combinations in speaking are unpredictable. There are different word phrases, expressions and synonyms to convey a thought in English.

8. It is possible to encompass in ready-made materials a wide variety of English phrases for each conversation topic. It is a worthwhile idea to prepare a potential list of phrases with sentences on each conversation topic, for example fixed conversational phrases that do not require English grammar knowledge (greetings, forms of addressing a person, thanks, well-wishing, apologies, agreeing, disagreeing, and emotions). Practicing English with such

materials can help a learner easily choose the most appropriate word combinations to convey a thought.

9. Multiple frequent reading of such sentences in English will gradually ensure firm memorization of English vocabulary and contribute to developing good speaking skills. By combining the most inclusive English phrase books, conversation books, general English thematic dictionaries, software, audio and video aids and websites you can create the most practical and thorough content for mastering each conversation topic in English for all levels including a wide selection of ready-to-use phrases, vocabulary and sentences for daily use. Your own ready-made materials could be more complete and more helpful than any conversation book or a phrase book in terms of useful comprehensive content and vocabulary.

Above-mentioned speaking activities can be used in EFL classes for promoting students' self-confidence. Yet, we would like to note that not all activities can be effective. It is teachers' responsibility to choose or adapt materials according to the students' level of English and fields of interests. ESP teachers may reform the speaking activities in accordance with their students' professional interests. For instance, if it medical school students, activities can be changed into the topics on medicine. Through this, teachers will help their students to develop their English in accordance with their future profession.

The list of used literature

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